

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JUNE 16, 2024

JOHN 17:1-3

“ETERNAL LIFE---JOHN 17:3”

Four letter words have a very bad reputation. I won't mention any to you but you know what I mean. But there is one five letter word that is not always so pleasant either---d-e-a-t-h. It's a word we really don't like to hear or think much about. It reminds us of something we don't like and that we can't escape. The old English writer, Ben Jonson, talked about death in this way---
“When we were all borne, we began to die.” (“An Elegie on the Lady Jane Pawlet”, in Ben Jonson, edited by John Hollander, Dell Press, 1969, p. 119) Yes, death is inevitable.

Back in the days of sailing ships a sailor was back in his home village for a few weeks in between voyages. He and an old friend of his, a farmer, met at the local pub one evening to catch up with each other. The farmer told his sailor friend that he should leave behind the sea and come home and farm. He tried to convince the sailor that a life at sea was just too dangerous. To convince the sailor, he asked him, “How did your father die?” The sailor answered, “He died in a ship wreck.” “How about your grandfather?” “He also drowned in a shipwreck.” The farmer replied to this, “See, there you go---sailing is just too dangerous!” The sailor now asked his own questions of the farming fellow—“How did *your* father die?” “He died in bed at home.” “And how about your grandfather---how did he die?” “He died in bed at home.” And the discussion ended with the sailor saying, “See! It's just as dangerous to stay on shore as it is to sail the oceans.!” (from Bishop Anthony Bloom, source unknown)

Wherever we live, whatever we do---death is inevitable. No one escapes. That is the bad news of that five letter word---d-e-a-t-h.

But there is good news, too. Yes, there is death. But there is also eternal life---living forever with the Lord. Today's gospel lesson from John 17 tells us about eternal life. It is part of a prayer of Jesus to His Father on Holy Thursday evening, the night before His death on the cross. Our assigned reading, John 17: 1-13, is just one part of that prayer. And we will focus on just the first 3 verses of that assigned reading----chapter 17, verses 1-3...Here they are: “Jesus lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may also glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.’”

Christ came to the world to bring us eternal life. In these verses, He tells us what eternal life consists of---in verse 3 He said, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Knowing the Father, knowing the Son of God---

that is what eternal life is.

A simple message today---we cannot avoid death. But we all want to live forever. How does this happen. As we saw in verse 3, by knowing Jesus Christ. Know Him *now*, live in Him *now*— and you already have eternal life in this world. And it won't ever end! Because after physical death, eternal life will go on for ever and ever.

So if knowing Jesus Christ now means eternal life now—and if you do want to live forever— then you should above all make knowing Christ better and better the focus of your life. So every day, every hour, think about what you say, what you do---is it helping you to know Christ better? Or pulling you in some other direction? The more fully we make knowing Christ better now, the more we experience eternal life now, and not just after death.

And so we should press on to know Him better, to live more fully for Him. Even the great Holy Apostle Paul said that he himself had to keep pressing on. We may think of the Apostles as perfect---and we should highly venerate them as the ones the Lord picked when He started His Church. But they weren't perfect. St. Paul was very aware that he "wasn't there yet". He, too, had to press on and press upward, higher and higher.....As he wrote in Philippians 3, verses 12 & 14---"Not that I have already attained or am already perfect, but I press on , that I may lay hold of that for which Jesus Christ has also laid hold of me.....I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

So we should be like St. Paul---pressing on in the Lord. Maybe for us it will be slow and gradual. Just be sure the arrow of your life is pointing up and you are headed in the right direction, always to a closer walk with the Lord. As long as you are pressing onward and upward, you are going in the right direction even if not as fast as you would prefer!

Pablo Casals is considered to be the greatest cellist of all time. His cello playing was on a level of its own. Every day throughout his life he spent hours and hours in practice, perfecting his playing. When he was 93 years old (and still performing) he had a visitor who said to him—"I suppose you don't need to practice much anymore. After all, you have reached the peak, you are the best!" Casals replied, "Oh, no, I still practice hours every day. I don't want to ever stop because it helps me become better. And now after much daily practice for almost 90 years, something nice is happening. Some days I think I finally am seeing a little improvement!"

Is your spiritual growth slow? Does it seem that getting to know Christ better is just a matter of a little bit at a time? Perhaps so, but just keep pressing on. Even if it's slower than you prefer, press on to know Him better like St. Paul pressed on. Live more completely for Him each day. And as you do, you will come to better know eternal life in the Lord even in this world, not just in the world beyond. For as Jesus told us in today's gospel reading---"This is eternal life--- that they may know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."